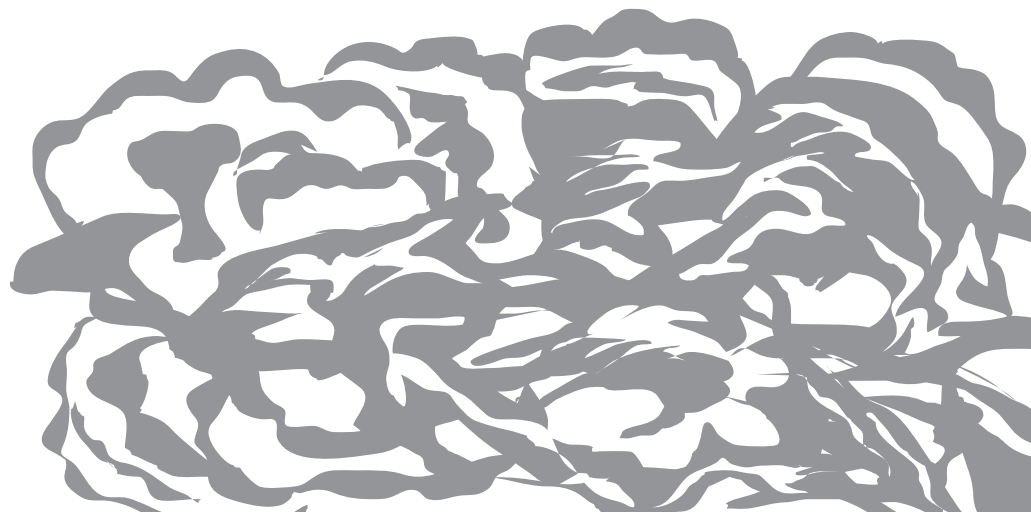




The Long Haul Is Too Long

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The Routine Struggle

Out in the woods on the outskirts of a nearby town, there is a population of fluffies that fumble on through their struggle for survival. When the animals native and adapted to the environment are not outcompeting these hapless biotoys, the hapless biotoys often encounter strife created by their own doing. Life in this forest is tough from the leaf litter up to the tallest treetop. It's just that much harder for fluffy ponies, and the weather is getting hot and humid as summer peaks...

There is a particular fluffy out among those trees. He is a stallion, silvery blue with a nigh electric platinum sheen at the very top of his coat.

Or rather, he would be, if not for the layers of grime that comes from a life scrounging in the undergrowth.

On any other animal his clean hide would be considered regal and admired. As far as fluffies go, he would have fetched a decent price— a few dollars at the minimum — if he was a shelter colt, but the life of a feral has irreparably depreciated that value. The fluff around his hooves and underbelly is covered in crusty, dried mud. His rear end is flecked with bits of old feces. Outside the law of the wild, this creature is repulsive.

However, the pressures of survival dominate.

Dawn spreads across the land on one new day. The crimson sunlight filters down through the leaves to the soil. Dead leaves and rocks blanket the earthen floor. Tree roots bulge and sprawl. The shadows are still scary at this hour, and the stirring stallion whimpers to himself as he wakes. He doesn't like waking up when the brightness of the day isn't at its height but he's been beaten down and conditioned to do so. His stomach pangs with hunger and he has no one but himself to rely on.

The fluffy sleeps in a hollow he scraped out at the base of a tall and wide tree trunk. It's a cramped space he has to crawl in and out of, but the sturdy roots provide stability, shelter and protection, so it's worth being uncomfortable for. Even then, he does mind the icky crawlies that pass through while he sleeps, but it is something he's grown to live with as some meanie thing that he can't do anything about.

He crawls out of the ground and skulks a fair distance to where the grass and bushes grow. The blades of grass are bland but he grazes on them out of necessity until he comes across fruit-bearing plants. These make him beam with joy and he eats the plant candies without regard. Every now and again he can't help stating his pleasure.

"Fank 'ou plantie for good nummies," the fluffy babbles in a subdued voice. He doesn't want a meanie munstah to come and hurt him, but he is just overjoyed that the food he found is so tasty. He feels better about the shadows, which recede and lighten as the morning progresses.

Before too long the forest is aglow with a healthy yellow. Birdsong and bustling buzzing of bugs fills the air.

And the air grows heavy and hot in short order. The fluffy finds it hard to breathe after a while, and waddling back to the hollow takes a lot out of him! This is the second time he experienced the air being mean to him.

"Huu, huuty breefing nu feew pwetty. So meanie." The fluffy used to wonder why mean things were meanie, but not so much as he grew older. Now he just knew meanie things were meanie and he just had to deal with it the best he could.

"Nee' dwinkie wawas. An... an mudsies huggies to stay coow," the fluffy contemplates. His chimeric pig lineage expresses itself as this instinct to cool down despite the thick fluffy coat. But the air is so hard to move through! Every fluffy everywhere forever must be feeling the same way he was feeling!

The longer the day went on, the more difficult it became to do simple tasks like walking. The stallion's tongue hung from his panting mouth as he made the trek to a nearby puddle left over from a recent rain shower. The humidity in the air prevented it from evaporating in spite of climbing temperature, but the question as to why the water was there never crossed this creature's mind. All he cared about was the fact he had something to drink and some mud to wallow in. That did not mean that he didn't have his reservations, though.

"Huu... meanie wawa smewws funny," the stallion mused about the water that had been left standing for days in the woods. Not only was it stagnant, it was a breeding spot for all sorts of nasty things. These facts did not register to his small mind, but he remembered the previous times in which he became ill after drinking from such water sources; sick enough to learn, but not to forever sleep.

"Bv' am so hawt... movf am dwy! Meanie wawa, pwease--" The stallion cut himself off with a resigned whimper. The water would be meanie no matter what he said or did. With a look of anguish, he sipped from the bad smelling and tasting puddle until he could stand no more of it and gagged. Then he rolled in the mud, which brought him some happiness as he revelled in doing so.

The mud weighed upon the fluffy like a blanket. His body warmed from the sensation, yet he was no longer burdened by the harsh weather. He was happy again, even after drinking from the mean water.

Of course, he later fell ill. His stomach rumbled and he sprayed defecation in uncontrolled, discomforting spurts for hours. He knew he couldn't just go back to the hollow because then it would be too nasty to sleep in. He couldn't go to the good nummies place because he didn't want to be mean to the plants that gave him delicious food, and most of all, he didn't want to eat poopy nummies. The stallion, sobbing about his misfortune, wandered aimlessly while his malady ran its course.

Anything that prowled behind the bark, or slinked stealthily in the branches overhead, surely

passed the fluffy by as potential prey due to how disgusting he was.

It was late at night when the fluffy mostly recovered. He hadn't drunk enough foul water to be as worse off as he could have been, again, having gone through similar pain in the past. He was miserable all the same, however. The stallion smelled awful and he was too cold to sleep away from his safe hollow, which meant he was stuck enduring the scary dark. Every so often he spewed more poo from his behind and he did not know if it was sicky poopies or scaredy poopies.

It was a long night.

By daybreak, the stallion retreated back to his safe haven. He was starving, but sleep took priority over everything else. By time he woke back up, the mud had dried into a shell, baked like clay in a kiln. It cracked and flaked when the fluffy wriggled his body to stand.

The stallion went to his usual place to eat plantie candies, and he was delighted to see another fluffy there that day! It was a mare, and he found her to be the most beautiful thing he'd ever laid eyes on. Her fluff was a smoldering amber color and her mane was honey-gold.

She spotted him too. The stallion bounded at her with thoughts of special friendship, huggies and babies filling his mind to capacity, however she scurried away in revulsion, going so far as to disregard the tasty nummies she was eating.

"Tcky poopie fwuffy, stay 'way!" cried she.

The stallion, weary from the cumulative effects of his ordeal and heart-hurties, gave up the chase and sobbed. It was too hot to not be a muddy-poopie fluffy, and it wasn't his fault that the water was mean!

He laid his head on the dirt and covered his eyes with his front hooves while he bawled bitter sorrow. How was he ever going to get a special friend and babies?

The long haul of life was too long for him to conceive. It tormented the stallion that it seemed he would forever be alone.



Rejection is a Catalyst

Heart hurties made for a difficult morning for the fluffy. More difficult than usual. After the initial wave of sadness, the fluffy stallion heard that tiny voice in the back of his small mind that shifted his focus to the constant drive to stay alive.

"N- nummies," he muttered meekly, echoing the thought, to remind himself why he was in the grassy patch. His tummy was emptier than his heart, he realized. Even so, the dirty fluffy felt so surreal and numb after having that mare, that captivating thing, disappear from his life as quickly as he'd happened upon her.

Seeing as he was born a feral, the stallion was never tempted with skettis, but after that fleeting moment, he joined the ranks of fluffies that knew the pain of want. The pain of truly wanting something.

The longing.

Planties could not give huggies, and the nice plantie candies they gave didn't make the sting fade. While eating, the stallion caught himself staring out into the greenery absently every so often, not really seeing what was out there until he reined in his meager attention to the present. It gave him scaredies on top of the heart hurties that he couldn't keep focused enough to make sure the munstahs weren't out looking for him.

"Huuu, no wike dis. Fwuffy am be stwong... huuu," the stallion quivered to himself. After a short time, he no longer felt compelled by his appetite. But still, the desire for something he did not yet understand remained, leaving him restless while he hadn't a clue what to do with his time.

The day cared not for the fluffy's troubles and temperatures soared before noon. By then he had gone back to his burrow underneath the tree. He knew he had to find water-- good water -- soon, or he may not see many more bright times before long. The stallion was at an impasse; he knew that trying to do anything when it was so hot out would only put him in a worse off state, but waiting at his hollow was boring, and going out before the dark time was so scary!

But what choice did he have? That time when the buwny baww made the sky all pretty like fluff was the only chance he would have to move around freely again after it got too hot, although the shadows lengthened creepily across the ground and drew frightening pictures on every tree-friend and rock-buddy. And the munstahs liked to run around at that hour too! The fluffy whined and tucked his snout into the crook of a foreleg. So meanie. This would be his life for the forevers until it started to get cold and dark again, and the ice wawas started to fall.

With one defeated huuu, the stallion consigned himself to the comfort that he already endured all of this once before. He was a stronger fluffy now. Smarter.

"Smawty-friend-fwuffy 'noh how do. Be otay," the stallion reassured himself. The fluffy let himself drift off to napping to conserve his energy and make sure he wouldn't be sleepies at dark time.

Sunset. The wind blew cooler. Fiery orange brought out the wonderful hues of the forest. The fluffy stallion opened his eyes, yawned and stretched out his stout body. Then with a snort and determined huff, he went out into the breach.

Bright light streamed through the vegetation. Save for a natural level of unease that was healthy for a fluffy, the stallion felt that he could walk easy through this domain. He would have liked to feel the breeze through his fluff, but the caking of mud on his hide was perceptibly obstructing. He thought back to what the mare yelled when she fled from him, and he felt... heavy.

"Fwuffy am need a bath," he determined, sadly. Maybe if he took one earlier, he would have been a soon-daddeh by now. But more than lingering on what could have been, the fluffy regretted not being able to fully appreciate the nice weather, now that most of the days ahead would be mean.

The breeze started to unsettle the feral after some time. When the trees grew more spaced out in his search for water, he was able to see the sky clearer and perceive the passage of time. Daylight trickling away, darkness seeping in from above. The first twinkle-spots were starting to show up. The rustling of leaves in the breeze became ominous. The stallion's heart quaked. Huuu.

Yet he continued. His ears perked at every errant noise and his hooves were placed gingerly with each step he took, but the stallion kept true, albeit with a concerted effort to be as small of frame as possible. The munstahs would have a harder time seeing him if he tucked into his fluff, surely.

The stallion knew his dedication paid off when the trickle of running water reached him. Wawas! He was tempted to dash to it, but thought better of it. Danger was everywhere. Ahead of him was a slight rise of dirt and rock that prevented sight of what was behind it- a munstah could be hiding right there! Huuu...

The stallion was shaking. He had just about summoned all the courage he could muster. 'Run 'way!' said the little voice in his head, and the fluffy almost listened to it. He wanted nothing but to be safe in his hole for the night. But what was one night's safety if it meant sleeping forever later? Huuuuu...

He peeked over the mound. Some tree-climbing munstahs were darting around, and pawing at the dirt whenever and wherever they stopped. One of them shot upright and looked like it was leaning back on its big bushy tail. Its big round eye was pointed right at the stallion, and he was sure it was able to see him, how intently locked in his direction it seemed.

"Huu. No faiw. Fluffy hide behind dirties. How 'noh?" he asked under his breath. The feral stallion knew enough not to make noise when hiding, but impulsive speech was coded into his genes and thoroughly out of his control.

The big-toothed munstah finished rolling and biting hard nummies in its hands, and bounded off to find more. The fluffy remembered that he was covered in dirties too! He was such a good hidey fluffy... but he really needed that bath. He didn't want to be an icky poopie fluffy anymore.

Unbeknownst to him, the stench that followed him being carried on the wind drove the squirrels away.

The stallion traversed the rest of the distance to the edge of a stream without further incident. The sun's glow was stretched along the horizon, and the sky overhead was a deep blue dotted with stars. He drank the water, which sparkled with the last light of day on its surface. It was so crisp and cool and yummy! Not meanie wawas!

"Wawas gib fwuffy cweanies?" the stallion asked. Cautiously, he dipped a hoof into the current. He shivered. "Coudies." With a small frown on his face, the fluffy waded into the stream. Immediately, the clear water turned murky around the fluffy's body.

He paced in the shallow water and knelt to let it run over his back. It was uncomfortable to begin with, but as the stallion grew more accustomed to the water, he started to splash and frolic, and even dipped his head under it. He had so much fun, he almost forgot he was supposed to be afraid of the dark.

His blissful ignorance of the encroaching night only lasted so long. When the day was but a sliver slipping off the edge of his world, the wide-eyed stallion emerged from the stream as a new, fearful fluffy, shivering when the breeze blew. Fortunately, this night was not as cold as the previous one, but regardless, he slunk back the way he came.

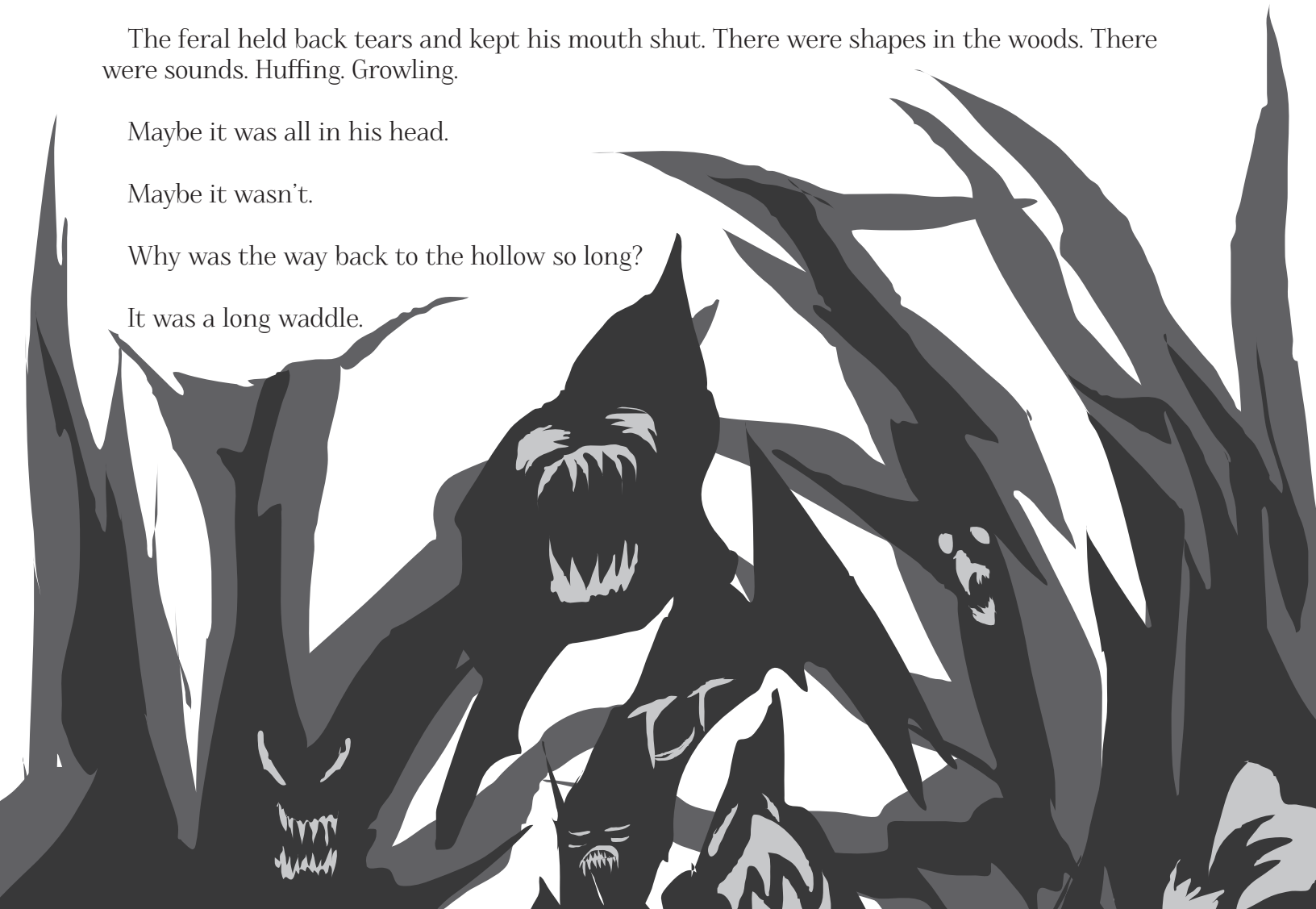
The feral held back tears and kept his mouth shut. There were shapes in the woods. There were sounds. Huffing. Growling.

Maybe it was all in his head.

Maybe it wasn't.

Why was the way back to the hollow so long?

It was a long waddle.



Garden of Fear

The munstahs were so scary that even the nighty baww was hiding. The cloak of the eventide was wrapped around the stallion too tightly. Every shape had the slightest silhouette, which only became apparent when the fluffy was just about right on top of... whatever they were supposed to be. Planties, probably. Meanie sneaking planties that wanted to shake and cry, and let the munstahs give hurties to the stallion. Or maybe sorry rocksies that wanted to give wowstest hurties to his hooves!

Everything was so meanie in the dark times! But the fluffy knew he couldn't weep, despite the fact that he could hear his poor little heart thumping away at the peripheries of his hearing. His heart had the worst scary-saddies! Tears were welling up at the corners of the fluffy pony's eyes.

Perhaps it was his mind reeling from terror, but the munstah noises seemed to come from every direction, even from above. He didn't dare look anywhere but right ahead of him, however, desperate to discern some kind of shape in the umbral muck. The stallion was convinced on an instinctual level that if he went looking around him, the last thing he would see would be the gleam of giant sharp toothies, an instant before they came together on his head.

The fluffy scrunched his snout up with the magnitude of his focus but to no avail. He felt the muscles at his rear relax as he made scaredy poopies! The waste splattered the leaf litter noisily and the feral let out a subdued whine. The tears started to flow freely down his cheeks.

"Fluffy no wan! No wan!"

The feral broke out into his fastest waddle-gallop while repeating his horrified mantra.

"No wan!"

He gasped and hiccupped in between the words when he started to get winded after a few yards.

"No—" A hacking cough. "Pwease! Pwease daww time munstahs!" He yelped as a sharp pain shot up a leg and then he let out the fluffies' distinctive breathy wail as he tumbled over across the forest floor. After a few feet, the stallion ended up on his back, where he exclaimed an indistinct verbalization of panic. His hooves flailed about in some attempt to run, having not yet grasped that he was the wrong way up in his distress.

"Am foweba sweepies! Eeeee!" The creature's body began to writhe and act on its own accord. Lashing out with his legs at some hypothetical attacker, the stallion pushed off of what felt like the hard bark of a tree and flipped himself upright. Clumsily, he bolted off without conscious thought, unable to keep himself from staggering about. More scaredy poopies fell from his behind as he went but he didn't notice. The tears, sobs and other sounds of despair ceased as his baser want for self-preservation took control.

The feral made a beeline for a mass in the shadows. Upon entering it, twigs and brambles raked his fluff and the flesh underneath. This was a thicket of bushes! He did not feel the meanie scratchies while he all but hurled himself deeper into the tangled plants. He shrugged through the tightest, awkward confines and continued a tad farther until he just could not cram himself into a tighter space.

The feral heaved and panted when he finally came to a stop and he collapsed onto his stomach. His head pounded. His hard breaths flared his nostrils and blew up dust. When the fluffy creature realized that the heavy beating footfalls were melding with the forest ambiance around him and growing more distant, he only had a few minutes before he succumbed to exhaustion.

The stallion opened his eyes again and was greeted by sunlight. For the briefest of moments the thought occurred to him that he had the worst bout of night terrors. Then he felt the sting of the scrapes all along his sides and his legs.

It was also about then that the stallion noticed he was not in the hollow underneath his tree. HUUU. To top everything off, somehow he was still too tired to bemoan his fate, being stuck in the thicket. The stallion was certainly too tired to attempt an escape immediately.

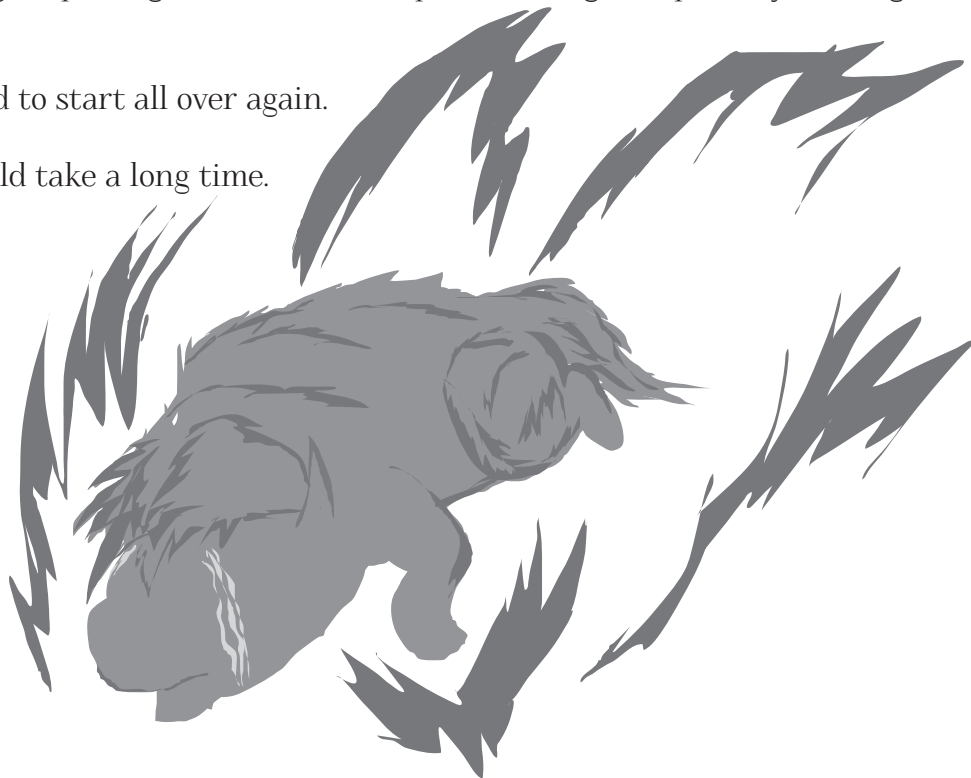
He lied where he was as a listless heap. "Nee' huggies. Pwease... huggies. 'Peshaw fwend... huuu."

But the stallion only had himself to rely on. So he picked himself up and began the arduous task of turning around in the cramped confines of the bushes. More scratchies beset his body and the stallion sobbed. "Boo boo jooosies... owwies..."

Several minutes and hurties later, the fluffy creature was free again. At the end of the long ordeal, the fluffy realized he had a choice to make: return to the hollow that he'd grown attached to, or return to the stream and make a new home there, so that he did not have to risk the wrath of the night in search of water. The option to take was clear to him, but it gave the battered feral many saddies all the same. He was exchanging a reliable feeding spot for a reliable water source as well. He would have to go exploring the area for new pastures to graze, possibly missing out on plantie candies.

HUUU. So meanie. He had to start all over again.

Starting over again would take a long time.



Life Worth Living

Red stained the greyish blue hide. Along with the blood streaks, there were dirt smears and clumps that clung to the previously wet fluffy pelt.

The weary stallion ate from the bushes that acted as his sanctuary from the munstahs, and he reflected on how unfair it was that he took a bath only to get dirty again, as well as getting sorry plantie scratchie-owwies. He was sighing a lot with these stormy thoughts rolling around in his small mind. The fluffy knew better than to ask why things had to be so meanie to him, although that did not mean that he couldn't feel beaten down by it all. There weren't ever any easy days that he could remember in his admittedly small mental archives. Even days of rest were hard, because those meant he felt sorry-sicky, or the weather was too bad to play or find wawas and nummies. The last couple of days were especially rough, though.

The fluffy reckoned it all started when he drank that meanie wawa puddle. HUUU. He thought to himself out loud,

"Meanie wawa make fwuffy sickie, an' mow meanie thingies happen to fwuffy aftah. But dat am otay, because am gud fwuffy. Swawty-friend and stwong, nao. Wiww wib many fowebas... an' maybe hab babbeks with pwetty mawe!"

He pushed his snout into the bushes and pulled off a mouthful of leaves. As he chewed, he couldn't stop himself from shedding quiet tears, which rolled ungraciously down his stuffed cheeks. Regret ran through his veins, leaving him hollow with longing once again. The nummies were not too good either which just made the fluffy feel worse-- too dry and abrasive on his tongue and there were no candies growing on the bush. Maybe if more wawas came from the sky, the leaves would have tasted better. Maybe if there were more wawas, the stallion wouldn't have had to roll in the mud to stay cool--

The fluffy swallowed the unappetizing mulch and closed his eyes. He did not cry. He simply said with a small rueful tone,

"Wan... wan pwetty mawe back. Wan tell hew how pwetty she is. Jus' wan dat, nao. No eben babbeks... no eben 'peshaw huggies. Jus' pwetty mawe fwend fo' pway wif and wub."

He hesitated to open his eyes. Some part of him was afraid that when he opened his eyes, that brilliant sundown mare would be standing right next to him, having overheard everything he said. Another part of him wanted just that; if she was back and heard his confession, they could go on to live together for the rest of their forevers!

Anticipation and dread made his heart race. What a meanie feeling it was! The stallion's expression was contorted in a wince as he slowly opened his eyes and...

There was nothing out there but the same when he looked around. After a moment, a trilling

bird song carried through the trees. The fluffy lowered his head, both relieved and disappointed.

"Maybe fluffy no see pretty mawe ebew 'gain...? Huv..." These were some of the worst saddies he ever felt. Worse than when his mummah told him he was old enough to leave his nestie and take care of himself, somehow.

Remembering his mummah made the fluffy realize that she had been right, however.

He took care of himself for this long. His mummah would be proud to know he was still out there in the woods despite all the meanie dangers. The stallion wiped his tears away on a hoof and sniffled. He started to figure that sometimes saddies had to happen in order for a fluffy to grow big and strong. It could be that in order to be a good daddeh one day, he had to feel what it was like to lose a special friend, just like how it took him losing his family home to be a good fluffy on his own.

"Otay. Fwuffy wearn wesson. Fwuffy am be stwong, so fwuffy am be stwong fo' fammy wheneba fwuffy hab."

It might take a long forever for that to happen, but this fluffy was a good fluffy. He would do what he had to in order to tough out the bright and dark times until he was a great old stallion like his daddeh before him.

The feral went back to the stream. It disheartened him at first to learn how close by it still was, but with the air heating up by the minute, he was glad he had nice cold, clean water to drink and wash in. A fair trade for the not-taste pretty leaves.

He bit his lip as he rinsed the scratches on his body off. Dirt and dried blood lifted off of his fluff and skin and was washed away. After leaving the stream, the fluffy found a nice rock to sit on. It was shaded from the hot sun so it wasn't burning to the touch, but at the same time being on it made the stallion dry off faster and feel pretty about himself.

Things were looking up again for him! All he had to do was make a new burrow and find some food he actually liked. Once he did that, he could fall back into the routine of evading predators and staying healthy, and be the best fluffy he could be. The stallion was sure of that!

Exploring someplace new was fun! It was so meanie-hot, but the fluffy didn't care because he knew he would be alright at the stream. The sun was bright so he could see everything out in the green, and he reasoned that not many things were able to brave the buwny baww like he was able to now.

And it did not take long at all for him to come across the first bounties of his new home. The fluffy followed the flow of the stream until he came across some curious looking trees. The trees by the stream were especially tall and robust, and tiny pretty spots dotted the branches way up high. He saw a bunch of wingie-munstahs and toothie-munstahs gathered around the roots, not minding each other as they picked at some pretty bawws on the ground.

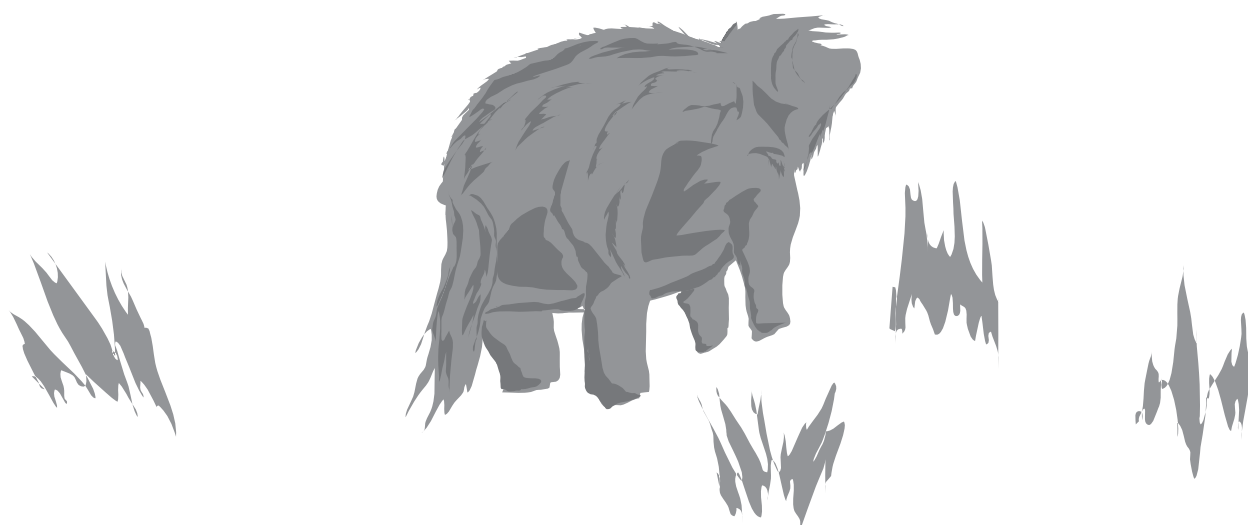
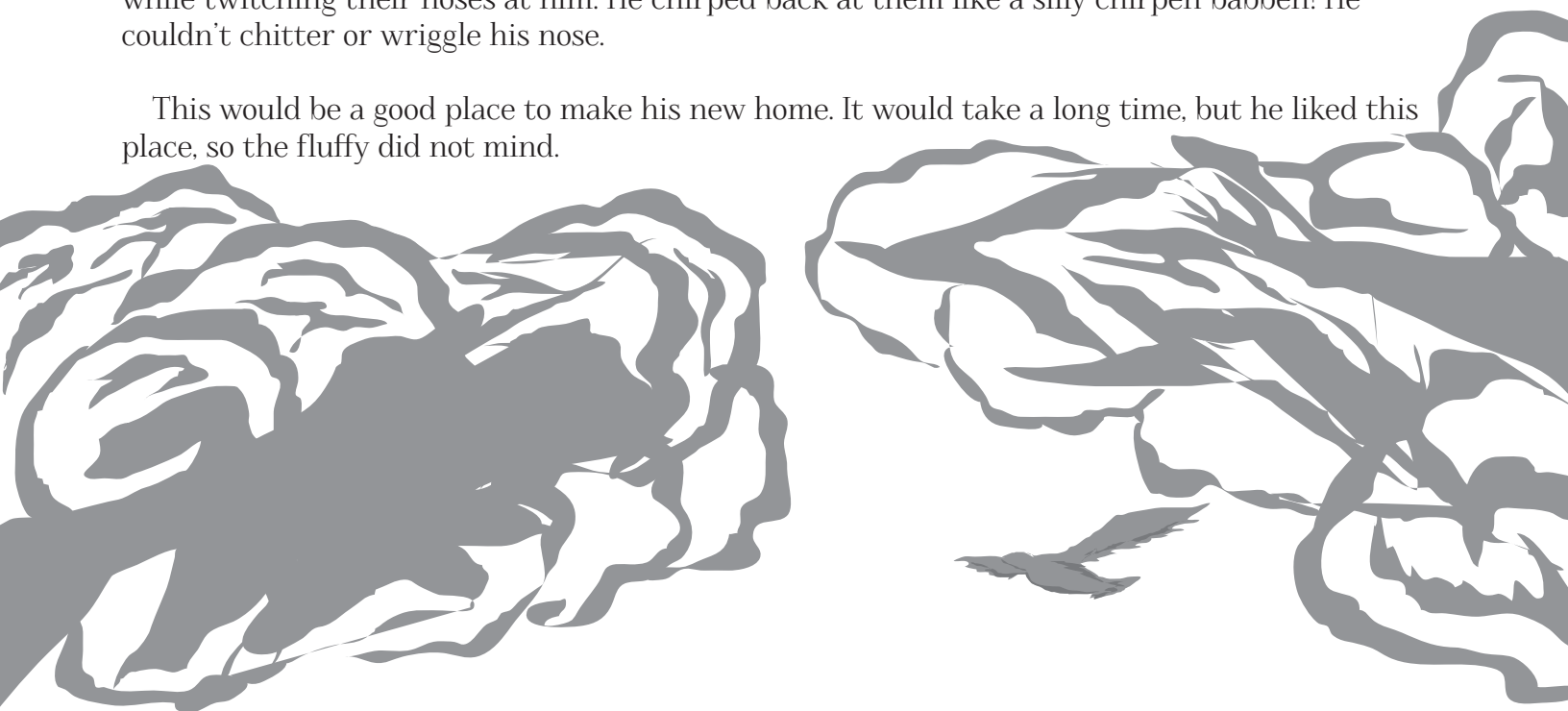
Intrigued, the stallion approached the scene and was surprised that the other creatures did

not mind his presence. There were more than enough nummy bawws around! He located one for himself amidst the undergrowth and took a cautious bite out of it.

It was wonderful! A super plantie candy! “Fwuffy am so happed! Fank ‘ou twees fo’ gud nummies!” With his gratitude and respects paid to his new friends, the stallion ate the fruit, then drank of the stream.

Birds chirped at him. He chirped back like a silly chirpeh babbeh! And the squirrels chittered while twitching their noses at him. He chirped back at them like a silly chirpeh babbeh! He couldn’t chitter or wriggle his nose.

This would be a good place to make his new home. It would take a long time, but he liked this place, so the fluffy did not mind.



Know Thy Neighbors

The feral dedicated some time to rest and recover from the night of most scaredies. He spent the remainder of that day nestled in the roots of a big tree with thoughts of digging another hollow firm in his head. It may have been the most solid idea he's ever had... ever since he decided to dig the first one out, at any rate. He knew if it worked once, it would work again.

The fluffy, proud of his smawtiness, had a hard time falling asleep that night. He wanted nothing more than to break soil and build his new home. He chastised himself, "Smawty-friend-fwuffy is being a siwwy dummeH fwuffy. No am dig if too sweepies! Go sweep, eben doe 'cited!"

He laid his chin down. When he was not asleep in the subsequent seconds, the fluffy flopped onto one side and huffed. When that failed to deliver sleep, the stallion rolled onto his back and started to thump his hooves against the packed dirt.

"Dis no wowk." He pouted his lips at how unfair it was that he would never fall asleep before his very important day of work.

The frustrated fluffy fell asleep within the hour despite himself.

He awoke to the early dawn and mumbled, "Wha-- sweepies? So fast!" before yawning and stretching out his small body. "Fank 'ou, sneaky sweepies," he made sure to mind his manners so that the nice sleep would come to him every dark time.

Then the fluffy went to the stream to wet his throat before he applied himself to the task ahead. This was such a momentous day that he would skip breakfast. When he was done drinking water, he went back to the same spot where had been sleeping, still warm compared to the surrounding chilly earth. His little fluffy pony muscles tensed and flexed underneath his coat, intuitively aware of the latent talent they possessed compared to hornie and wingie fluffy-friends.

The fluffy creature dug a hoof into the ground and dredged up a humble divot. From this humble beginning, the stallion produced a trench that dipped underneath the timber. When the bulk of the tree was directly overhead, the feral expanded his digging outwards and went a little deeper; this new burrow would be bigger and better than the last! With this step done, he went on to kneading the walls to compress the dirt tight, rounding them off and achieving a hewn effect on the boundary of the new hollow. The walls were further reinforced with twigs and leaves packed under another layer of dirt, which was also kneaded into a solid foundation. The fluffy was done with construction of his new home by noon and he brimmed with accomplishment.

He was also incredibly dirty and hungry, as could be expected from a hard working fluffy pony. The stallion treated himself to nummies before taking a bath in the stream, and then he dried himself on his sitting rock. While on top of the rock, he contemplated the creature comforts he could add to the burrow. If he couldn't do anything about creepy crawlies, he could at least offset the heeby jeebies by making a nestie pile for even better sleepies.

"Jus' like daddeh nestie," the fluffy realized with a soft gasp. He felt a twinge of pride knowing that he was falling into step with his fluffy ancestors... whoever they were. Probably the biggest and bestest strong fluffies!

Later on, the fluffy was finished carpeting his lair with soft leaves, long grass and thatch. He was so happy with his work that he spent a little time breaking in the bedding by rolling around on it until it was pressed flat and comfy. At that point, the stallion lied down and appreciated the sounds of the forest backed by the soothing trickle of the stream, which was a subtle whisper underneath the rest of the sounds.

The fluffy almost fell asleep again.

But he didn't want to just yet! He wanted to enjoy the hot bright time while he still had the buwny baww in the blue-fluff, so he got up and trotted up the shallow incline out of the root-swaddled burrow.

The stallion went further down stream to explore. Along the way he saw more birds and squirrels, a myriad of bugs zipping through the air and lounging on overturned logs, and a variety of fungi growing on said logs and other bits of debris scattered throughout the forest. In time the fluffy happened upon an animal that was slightly larger than himself, and pitch black. He'd seen some of these creatures before from afar, but today was the first time he was close enough to make out most of the features. Because of this, the fluffy kept his respectable distance and crouched low to the ground to go unnoticed.

It was round in body shape and had a slightly long head. Tall, intimidating quills bristled along its back. It looked meanie, but moved in a deliberate, unhurried manner. The stallion figured nothing would want to bother it since it looked the way that it did. He did not want trouble it either. He waited for it to shuffle out of his path before continuing onwards.

He had a bit of a fright after some time. He saw a long hissy-munstah slithering across the way before disappearing into a covering of fallen leaves and wood chips. Its scales were braids of brown, yellow and black. The fluffy hurried along in another direction. Even in the bright times, scary munstahs could be found! Luckily these were not the kinds that chased fluffies.

After a certain distance the landscape dipped downwards and the stream flowed over exposed rock as a small waterfall. So pretty! From the smooth bluff he could look down and see a group of not-fluffs! Pretty, even though they were all shades of caramel, black and cream! The stallion marveled at how much larger they were than him, yet their bodies were so thin and their legs were so lanky! A few of them were strange hornie-friends, except they had a bunch of hornies!

The stallion was tempted to run over to them and make friends, yet his fluffy wariness restrained him to merely observing how they acted. His fascination, as expected from a fluffy, was shallow and he overlooked much of the nuances of the herd's behavior, such as how there was one deer that kept watch while the others foraged for food.

What he lacked in intricate thought, he more than made up for in reflexive attentiveness. The stallion also had an advantage over the herd's sentries from his elevated position. This is why he was able to detect the disturbance in the foliage before the deer did, and his eyes honed in on it as he let out a gasp.

A small prowly-munstah! And it was out in the bright time too! Huu. The long grass gingerly parted around the lithe frame of the canine. The stallion whimpered with the memories of the worst night ever resurfacing in his small head. For all he knew, this was the same one that wanted to give him forever sleepies!

Huuuuu. The fluffy lied down flat and covered his eyes with his forelimbs. "No faiw! No faiw!" he sobbed quietly. As much as he knew better than to ask, he couldn't help himself; "Why nyu homesies hab too-many munstahs!? No faiw! No eben hide in bwight time!?"

Against his better judgement, he moved to look at the herd again. The coyote was creeping up on one of the herd's young. The adolescent was no bigger than the gray-blue stallion himself. Huuuu. The babbeh not-fluff was going to get wowstest foweba sleepies!

"Nuu huw huw! No num babbeh!" The stallion shrieked. The herd of deer was alert in an instant, their heads shooting straight up and swiveling to find the danger. The coyote recoiled and sprawled itself low to the forest floor.

In another instant the deer scattered. They moved so quickly! The fluffy was amazed despite the fear surging up from every fiber of his being. Now it was his turn to run away!

He turned and started huffing with exertion right off the cuff. The coyote caught sight of the fleeing shape and snarled, before taking off in a sprint up the ridge.

The stream seemed to go on forever to the fluffy as he ran opposite to the flow. It would definitely take many forevers to run the distance, as opposed to walking it! Somehow. The fluffy heard the paws slapping against the dirt and wailed. No fair! He was running as hard as he can, how did the monster catch up already!?! Cheating monster!

The stallion cried out. There were no words, no pleas for mercy. Just the terror of knowing this could be the end. Of knowing he wasn't going to be a strong and big fluffy who would raise foals of his own. Huuuuu!

He could almost sense that the coyote's jaws were closing in on the pudgy inconvenience that ruined its hunt. These were the gleaming teeth waiting to chomp down on his head. A fluffy would do as a replacement for a tender fawn.

And that was when he heard the shrill exclamation of pain. The sharp screech... of the munstah. The stallion forced himself to trudge on against the tightness and the burning in his legs. Yet unlike the night before, he angled himself to look at the scene unfolding behind him.

The biggest and most muscular stag, the herd leader, was upon the coyote. It was absolutely

pummeling the unfortunate predator that had its cover blown by a fluffy pony, having chased it up the draw. The stallion watched the most violent, worstest sorry hoofsies ever! The thumping impacts made him wince every time they landed.

Soon the coyote scrambled away from underneath the buck, yelping and crying, lucky to be alive. Bright red blood stained its brown-gray pelt as it fled into the woods.

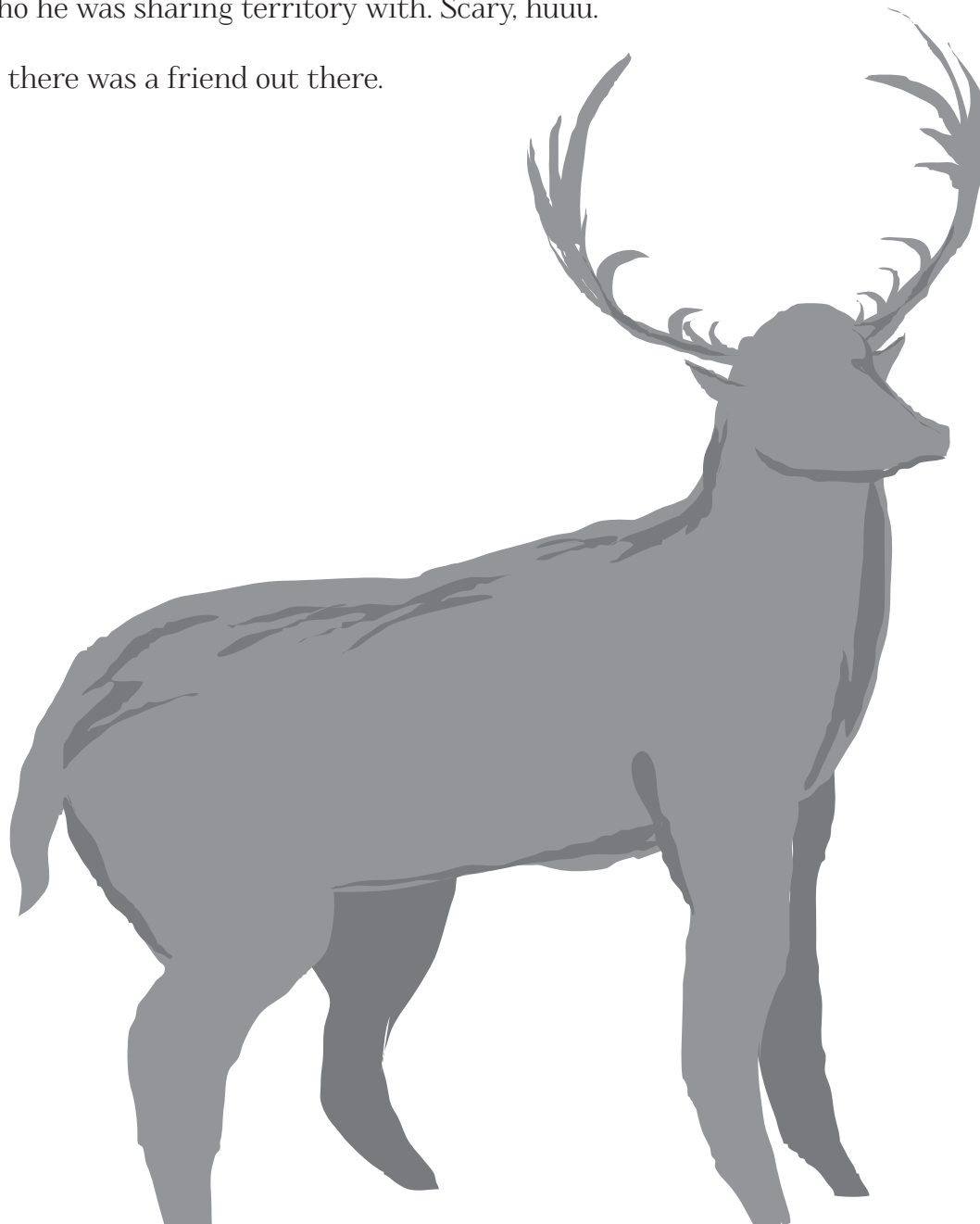
With the munstah defeated, the fluffy slowed down to a halt. His breaths came as heavy, labored heaving. There were several yards between him and the forest giant, and the two vastly different creatures regarded one another in a strange moment of acknowledgement.

“F-fank ‘ov, nice hornie-fwend...” The stallion stated hoarsely. “Sabe fwuffy fwom... foweta sweepies...”

The buck deer did not make a sound as he turned and went in the way of the stream, to return to the herd. He was content with knowing he had not lost one of his own.

This left the breathless fluffy to the long walk back to his nest. It was a long time to come to terms with who he was sharing territory with. Scary, huuu.

But at least there was a friend out there.



Adjusting to Uncertainty

The fluffy awoke the next day in his comfortable nest and smacked his lips drowsily. A few minutes passed. He spent them looking around at the product of his efforts, what had filled him with joy previously, wondering why he did not have that same satisfied feeling anymore. All the security he derived from living by the stream was gone and in its place was an underlying sensation that he was not welcome there. The stallion stayed where he was for a little while longer. He couldn't be sure that there wasn't something mean outside and he did not want to start the day off with scaredies. So he simply lied there until he could no longer ignore the need to drink, eat, and relieve himself. Begrudgingly, the stallion went up the sloped entrance to the hollow and paused at the precipice to the outside.

The radiance of early morning shined as any other day. The air was cool, but still. The forest seemed still asleep with its relative silence and peace. But with the weight of the previous days on his shoulders, the fluffy found it bittersweet. Even with a nice nestie, cold wawas and good nummies, nothing in this world was assured and all it took was one mistake to go from having a hard time to having no time at all. Even as he contemplated the way of the world, a red worm crawled out in the open, a small ways off from the burrow entrance. With a few deft flaps of its wings, a black bird swooped down from the unseen above in short order, snatched at the ground and carried the worm back up to its inevitable demise.

The fluffy blinked, stirred from his rumination by the abrupt movement. Although his senses were favored by natural selection and repurposed from their intended consumption of spontaneous, attention deficit television ads to keenly perceiving the environment, what just transpired was but a blur to his big pale eyes. He was none the wiser to his worries in demonstration.

Still, the discomfort remained.

But just as the worm inevitably met its death at the beak of the bird, the stallion inevitably ventured out to sate his needs and continue living with the time allotted to him.

Nothing stayed truly idle, not even the trees in the forest.

Too long away and abstract for the fluffy pony's small mind to grasp, and immaterial to his eyes' sight, the cycle carried on as it always had, and as it always would.

In time, the summer heat subsided and gave way to winter's cold. The verdant trees shed their leaves, and less and less animals wandered the fields of ice and snow, where the green once grew.

Eventually the days warmed again, the frost thawed and the plants flourished once more.

The blue-gray stallion woke one day in spring without realizing that he had entered the third year of his life, wiser and stronger than the last. It was raining, the air smelled moist and he heard the pattering of droplets on the leaf litter.

"Egh. No wan sky-wawa baffies!" the fluffy scoffed, but he still picked himself up and left the burrow. Little by little his fluff sagged and he paid it no mind. He drank from his stream and walked the short route to the first green nummies growing from the ground, because the fruits were not ready to drop so early after winter.

The blue-gray stallion woke up one day in summer. It was thundering on the cusp of a down-pour. His burrow seemed darker than usual, which was really upsetting because deep in his gut he knew it was supposed to be daylight out. The biggest, worstest munstah was stomping around the entire world that morning.

"Huuu. No pwetty. No pwetty at aww." The tiny voice wasn't the stallion's, but a mare! The fluffy's mouth gaped. He couldn't see her, but she was right there with him in the hollow. She heard him sniffing loudly in attempt to identify her amidst the churning earthy aromas before the storm.

"Who derel?" she snapped. She stared into the shadows but it was no use.

"Um... is fluffy. Dis fluffy nestie... b- bu' 'ou can stay because of bad wawas! Is scawedy ous'side..."

The mare was quiet for an uncomfortable moment. The stallion worried that he had done something wrong. But then he heard her say,

"Fank 'ou, fwuffy-fwend. 'Ou am nice."

And for the first time in a long time, the stallion had someone to hug and keep him company through scary weather.

From then on, the two remained together. Through the sunshine. Through the hard rain and the howling wind. Through the hot times and cold times. Through the good times and the scary times. Through it all, the blue-gray fluffy pony told his special friend how pretty she was, and made sure to be pretty as well for her sake. He played with her and she played with him, and whenever either one had saddies, they were there for each other.

The mare listened to the feral stallion's stories from the last year and was moved by his bravery, and followed him to the places that he knew. Together, they visited the old hollow, which nature had reclaimed and partially buried over time. She even met the i weird hornie-friend who didn't say anything as he looked after his herd.

The mare was a banana-yellow fluffy. Her mane and tail were curly and pale as milk. The fluffy mare looked like how some of the leaves did in autumn.

When the time was right, she became the mother of the stallion's first litter and they raised their foals by the stream. Played around the home tree. Grew old together with their family.

The day came that their children were old enough to leave the nest and join the rest of the forest fluffies in their journey to come of age. It was a day of many saddies, and also great pride.

For the feral stallion was old and aching. Both his and his mate's pelts were losing the youthful sheen and color. Rearing their litters, an impressive total of six foals, took a lot out of them! After a hard life lived, the end of the long haul was in sight, and so was the start of the next one, just on the other side of the burrow.

Lessons to learn. Tears to cry. Fears to overcome. Love to find.

Life to live.

The Long Haul Was Too Long

One More Story

The sun was setting over the fluffy couple's lives. In the ensuing months, their nest was quiet and vacant except for them, and the subtle reminders of the family that they had raised together. The distinct round and shallow depressions in the bedding of leaves and grasses. Many forevers had passed since that day when the six set off on their own, but the places where they had slept up until then had been left undisturbed by their parents.

Fluffies did not remember much since their minds were so small, but that only meant that the things that they did remember-- those things that they refused to forget-- were truly important. And at the couple's age, there weren't many things more important to keep track of. So they left those sleeping-places as they were. It was perhaps the one thing they had in common with their domesticated brethren adopted away in shelters in the nearby town; the ritualistic pledge to never forget one's family when the time came for foals to part with their mothers, or vice versa.

Occasionally the two old fluffies looked back on the days when they had to reason out the proper rotation in which to feed their young, to ensure not one of them went deprived of milkies. That was hard work, and the stallion had never felt such pressure and stress before! All those times when his life had been at risk when he was young and strong were nothing compared to the responsibility he owed to his offspring then. He was so grateful for his special friend, who took away some of the head hurties by helping him with the mathematics.

"Fwuffy hab one and one miwky pwace, wight?"

"Yus, one and one miwky pwace," the stallion agreed. His face was set in stern concentration, his eyes fixed at one point on the earthen floor, unwavering. The mare hummed thoughtfully to herself, and then she deduced,

"So dat mean, can gib miwkies to one and one babbeks fow a wittwe, an' 'ov pway wif oddahs untiw fwuffy weady

to switchies!”

All the while, the mare was gently poking and prodding her little fluffy children to keep them occupied, while their father contemplated her words deeply. After a little while, the stallion nodded and beamed with insight. “An’ den, fwuffy gib one mow one-and-one babbeh to mummah-fwuffy!”

“Yus! ‘Peshaw fwend am so smawties!”

“Nuh-uh!” the stallion protested. “‘Ov am smawty fwuffy-fwend, nao!”

This gave the mare a moment of pause, before she suggested, “Why no bof fwuffy am smawty?”

Their mutual support of one another weathered the adventure of fluffy parenthood. And now it was just the two of them, in the quiet of the burrow. The sun was setting.

“‘Peshaw fwend?” the stallion broached to the mare. His voice was tired.

“Yus?” she responded, sounding no better.

“‘Ov wanna pway?”

“Pway wut?”

“...Wanna pway tagsies?”

“Tagsies soun’ fun! Wets.... wets pway tagsies ‘gain.”

The stallion gave the mare a hug. A tight squeeze, as if it may have been the last one he ever gave anything. Then he helped her onto her old legs, and together they moved to the entrance of their hollow, ever careful not to disturb where their children had slept before they left the burrow.

